

Excavations of an Early Christian Pilgrimage Complex at Bir Ftouha (Carthage)

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The Bir Ftouha project, begun in 1994, was designed to meet threats to the site from the expansion of modern suburbs through excavation of the latest phases of the early Christian basilica complex. The 1999 season, partially funded by Dumbarton Oaks, was the last of five summer campaigns, during which an open-area excavation of about 1,600 square meters revealed parts of nine attached structures of a major Christian pilgrimage complex now tentatively dated to the sixth century. Although several years of study remain to be done, sufficient data has been gathered to answer questions regarding the plan, phasing, dating, and decorative program of the complex's monumental center.

The Bir Ftouha complex is important historically because it is the only known suburban basilica at Carthage for which it will be possible to write a reasonably detailed history from stratigraphic excavation. Although the east end of the site was excavated by Paul Gauckler in 1897 and the west end by Alfred-Louis Delattre in 1928–29, most of the basilica lay between their excavations.¹ Damaged since antiquity by the depredations of stone robbers, tomb robbers, and cultivators, all the colonnades and wall lines of the complex, save two small fragments of elevation wall, are proposed on the basis of surviving foundations.

From field observation and preliminary study, one major phase of construction can be recognized in the monumental center. The Bir Ftouha church appears to have been an ambu-

latory basilica of modest size, divided into three aisles and eight bays, with an enclosed apse in the east and narthex in the west. The ambulatory around the outside of the apse connected the church to a large annex building that included a baptistery marking the eastern extent of the complex.² A nine-sided polygonal entrance structure was attached to the narthex at the west end of the complex. Pottery dates the construction of the complex to the early sixth century. A second phase, in which minor modifications were made to some parts of the complex, appears to date to the mid-sixth century.³

This preliminary report, intended as an update of previously published reports, focuses on the baptistery at the east end of the basilica complex and the entrance structure at the west end, the major discoveries of the 1998 and 1999 seasons.⁴ These two structures illustrate the features that effectively distinguish Bir Ftouha from the other four suburban churches of Carthage.

²The annex building was the source of the mosaic with bird medallions and scenes of the doe and stag drinking from the four rivers of Paradise lifted by Gauckler and currently displayed in the Bardo (Tunis) and Louvre; M. Yacoub, *Musée du Bardo* (Tunis, 1996), 39, 43, nos. 203–209; F. Baratte and N. Duval, *Mosaïques romaines et paléochrétiennes du Musée du Louvre* (Paris, 1978), 79–80, no. 39.

³The ceramic finds from stratified contexts are few and poor in finewares, so the dates furnished by pottery provide rather broad *termini post quos*. It should be possible to refine the dating after the coin evidence becomes available. Clearly, the phasing will be refined in the course of writing the stratigraphic report, now in process.

⁴S. Stevens, A. Kalinowski, and H. vanderLeest, "The Early Christian Pilgrimage Complex at Bir Ftouha, Carthage: Interim Report," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 12 (1998): 371–83.

¹L. Ennabli, *Carthage: une métropole chrétienne du IV^e à la fin du VII^e siècle*, Études d'antiquités africaines (Paris, 1997), 111–41.

THE BAPTISTERY

The round baptistery (see Figs. 1A, 1B) at Bir Ftouha lay on the main east-west axis of the basilica, behind the apse.⁵ It was about 16 meters in diameter on the outside, with a little over half of its circumference enveloped by the annex building. The baptistery consisted of an ambulatory about 4 meters wide and an inner circular room about 6 meters in diameter. Only the packed clay foundations of the ambulatory floor survived, but the abundance of marble floor tiles in the fills of adjacent robber trenches suggest it was once paved with marble tiles. The original paving of the baptistery must have been at current ground level.

The solid concrete foundations between the ambulatory and the central room probably supported a double colonnade. They were some 2 meters wide, approximately double the width of the foundations of the outer wall of the baptistery, they may have supported a considerable weight of vaulting. The only known entrance into the baptistery from the annex building was through a colonnade of five columns in the northwestern part of the baptistery's outer wall.

The inner room was probably once covered in a mosaic now represented by a layer of crushed mortar and loose tesserae around the font in the center of the room. The font, once revetted in Carian and cipollino marble, was extensively looted; deducing its exact dimensions and shape from the remaining third of its rubble core is difficult. It appears to have had three steps: the top level was quatrefoil or cruciform with the arms aligned on the main east-west axis of the church, the middle step was probably oval, and the lowest, at a maximum depth of 1 meter, was circular.⁶ The ciborium

most likely consisted of four columns, probably placed between the arms of the cross, and it included some gilded stucco elements.

A drain from the font ran down into a small tank (with a capacity of approximately 4 cu. m) built between the foundations of the annex building and the curving outside wall of the baptistery. Its west and south walls (the foundations of the annex and baptistery) were lined with plaster. By contrast, its east and north sides were built of courses of cobble masonry pierced by numerous drainage holes. The bottom of the tank was also water permeable. This feature is likely to have been a soakaway chamber, designed to take water out of the font and leech it gradually into the clayey subsoils away from the buildings.⁷

The prominence of the baptistery in the design of the Bir Ftouha complex is perhaps its most remarkable feature. The baptistery was the culmination of the complex, lying at the eastern end of the main east-west axis of the complex, probably with a high clerestory and floor surfaces built up 40–50 centimeters above the mosaic floor of the annex building. This is the most prominently placed of all the baptisteries in Carthage, and its location is especially challenging to explain in a suburban church. Like the baptisteries added to Roman pilgrimage churches, it may reflect a response to the popular belief in the particular efficacy of baptism in the presence of saints.⁸

THE ENNEAGON

Balancing the baptistery at the opposite, western end of the complex was a unique, nine-sided polygonal entrance structure (Figs. 2A, 2B), one side of which was attached to the narthex of the basilica. Like the baptistery, the enneagon was about 16 meters across on the outside and consisted inside of a round central room and surrounding ambulatory. The ambulatory was about 3 meters wide, separated from the central room, which was approximately 9 meters in diameter, by a colonnade of nine columns, one opposite each corner of the polygon. In the center of the enneagon was a striking mosaic medallion of lilies

⁵Round baptisteries, although not common, are attested in North Africa at Djemila and Henchir Harat/Segermes; S. Ristow, *Früchrisliche Baptisterien*, *JbAC Ergänzungsband* 27 (Münster, 1998), 117, no. 75; 257, no. 714. For 5th–6th century African baptisteries located behind the apse, see Henchir Deheb, Ksar es Zit/Siagu, Maktar (Hildeguns), Sbeitla (Vitalis), and Sidi Habich/Enfida, among others. *Ibid.*, 117, no. 77; 260, no. 729; 261–62, no. 734; 263, no. 741; 264, no. 746.

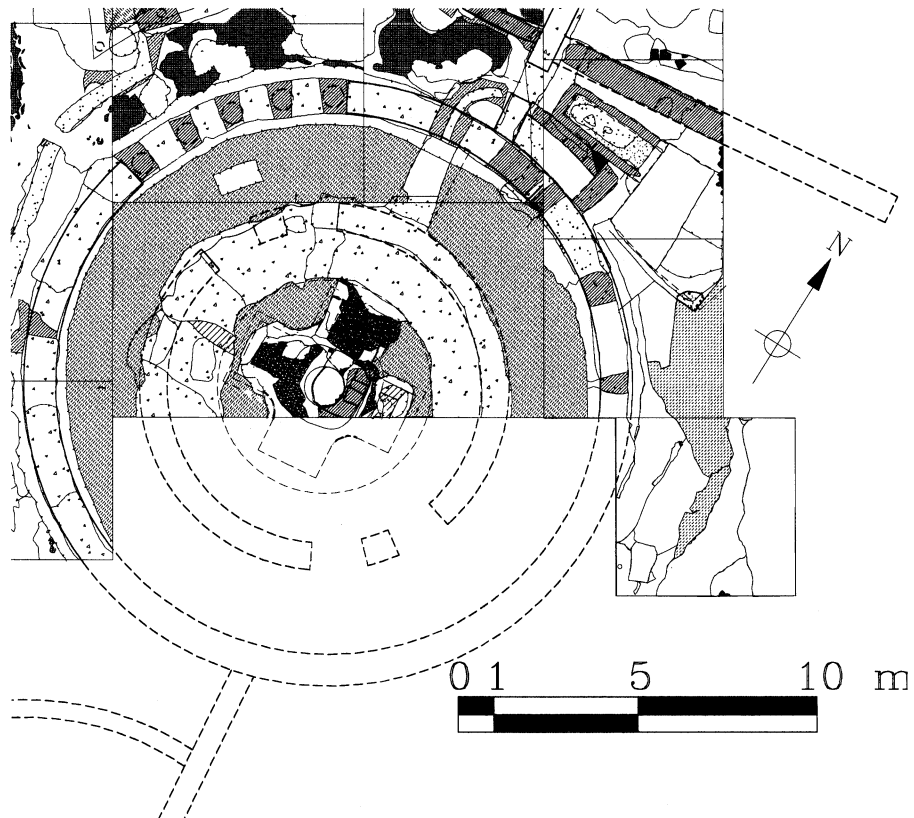
⁶The closest African parallels may be the fonts that use the same elements, though not necessarily in the same order, at Kelibia, Carthage, Sayda, Oumceten/Sidi Daoud, also Henchir Deheb; A. Khatchatrian, *Les baptistères paléochrétiens* (Paris, 1962), 38, nos. 279, 275, 278, and 30, no. 23.

⁷Thanks to Andrew Wilson for this suggestion.

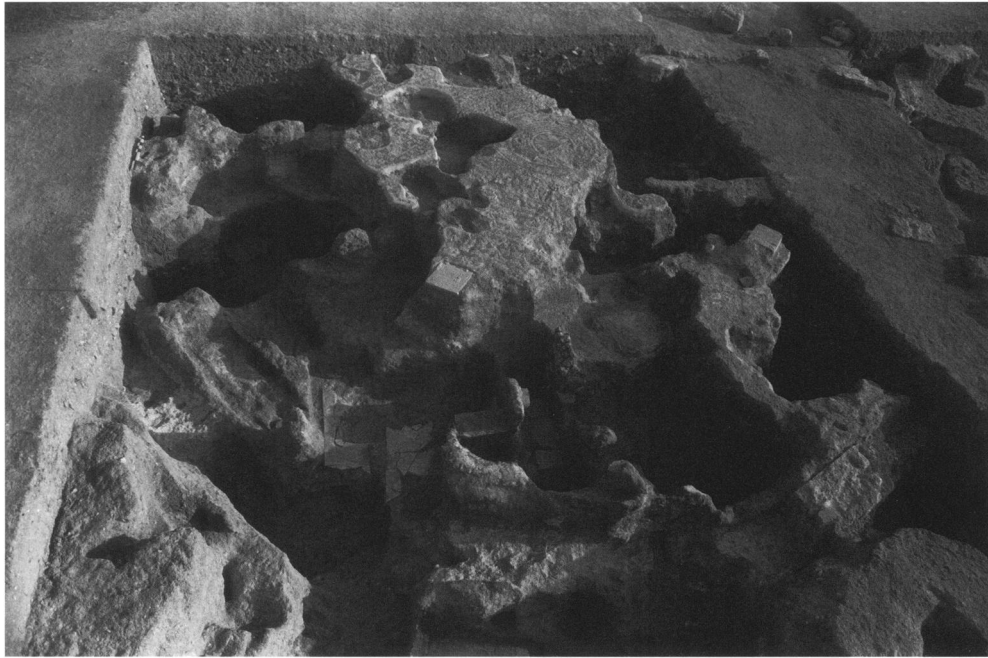
⁸R. Krautheimer, *Rome, Profile of a City, 312–1308* (Princeton, 1980), 56.



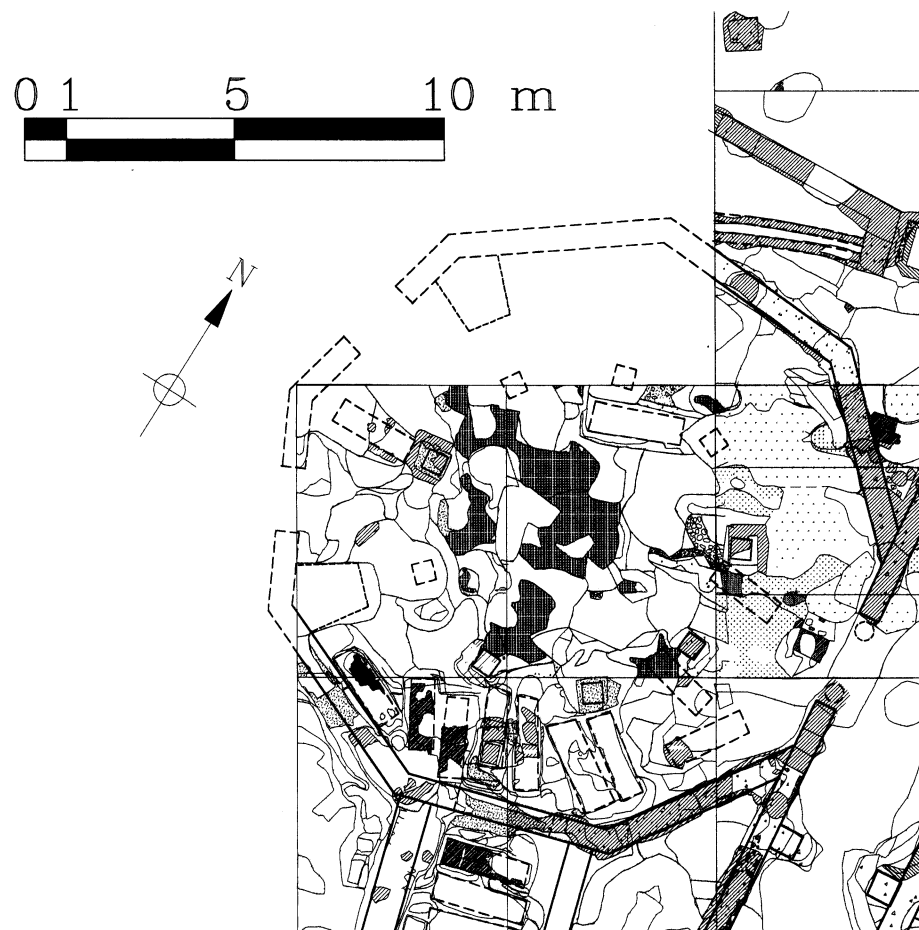
1A View of the Bir Ftouha baptistery from the south. The soakaway is just visible in the upper right corner. (photo: N. Rough)



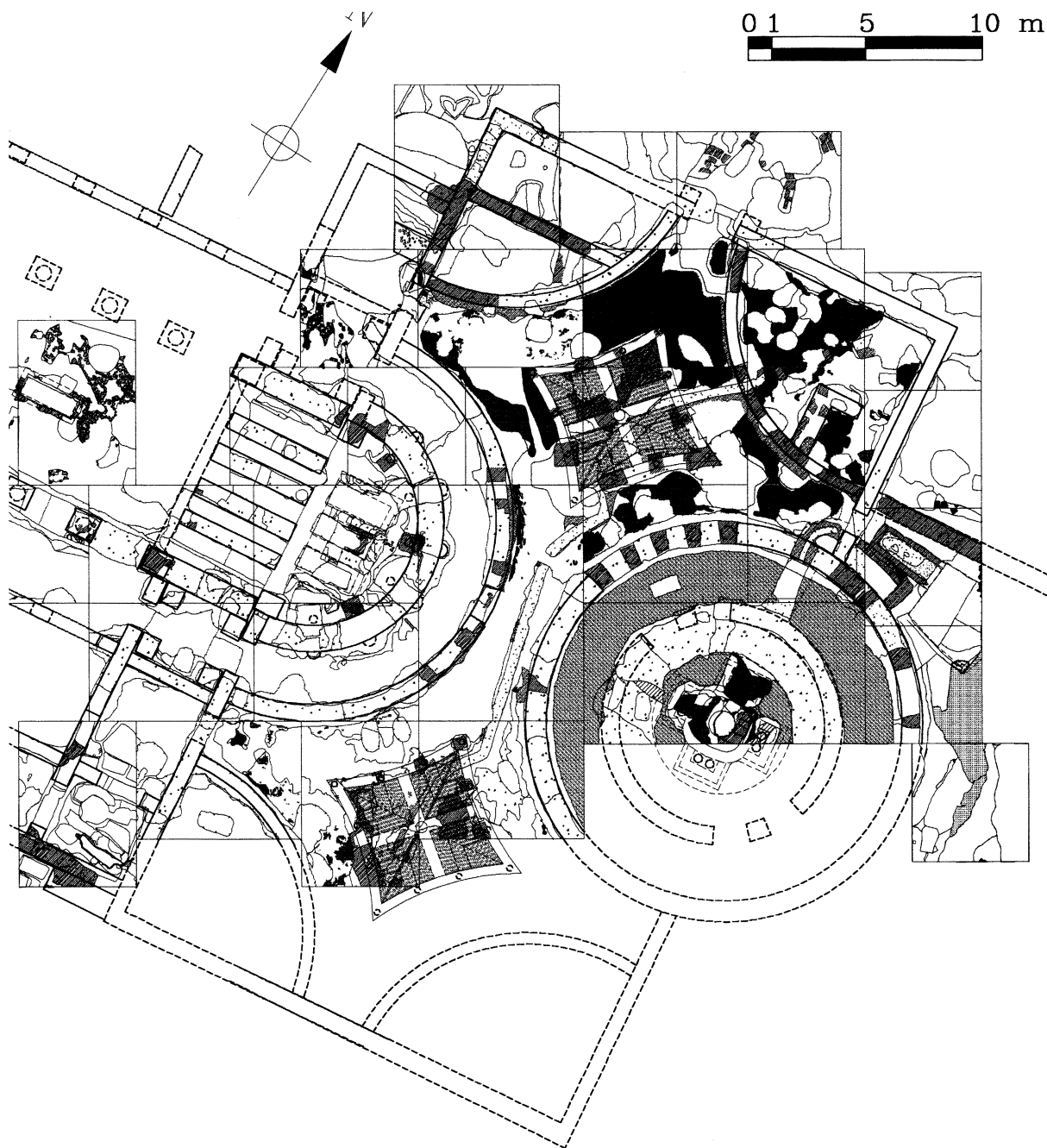
1B Baptistery in the working reconstruction plan superimposed on the 1998 Bir Ftouha stateplan (drawing: B. Dayhoff)



2A View of the Bir Ftouha nonagon from the south. The narthex of the basilica is visible in the upper right. (photo: N. Rough)



2B Enneagon in the working reconstruction plan superimposed on the 1999 Bir Ftouha stateplan. The privileged tomb is located at the top left. (drawing: B. Dayhoff)



3 Annex building in the working reconstruction plan superimposed on the 1999 Bir Frouha stateplan.
The ambulatory basilica is on the left. (drawing: B. Dayhoff)

in a laurel wreath surrounded by a border of tendrils. Radiating from it was a pattern of interlocking peltas with pendant grape leaves gradually increasing in size.

Entrance into the enneagon at the west may have been through two doorways on either side of the corner of the building that marked the main east-west axis of the basilica.⁹ Opposite this corner a single doorway led from the enneagon up one step into the narthex. The enneagon, lacking any obvious built feature at its center, seems to have been designed to funnel visitors into the basilica. Its most unusual decorative element was a roof of fine, decorated, red-slipped tile, which was found in great abundance in destruction layers. At least four different molded motifs were recovered, the most common of which was the facing heads of Mauritania and Africa familiar from late Roman African Red Slip plates (Hayes form 46) usually dated 400–420.¹⁰

After the enneagon was constructed, at least eleven tombs were sunk into its floor, almost all in the ambulatory. Subsequent robbing of the tombs removed virtually all ancient layers, leaving behind a few tenuous islands of mosaic in the ambulatory, including two fragments of tomb mosaics cut into the pelta mosaic. Adjacent to the enneagon toward the southeast was a burial chamber containing another four tombs. The arrangement of all the tombs suggests that they were individual burials of various dates, carefully placed to avoid disturbing earlier ones. The deep shafts, generous size, and remains, albeit scanty, of the elaborate tomb structures suggest that they were all high-status burials. An analogous but smaller group of late tombs was cut into the mosaic of the annex building at the east end of the complex; six tomb mosaics were found by Gauckler and one during the current excavations.¹¹

⁹A similar arrangement is found at San Vitale (Ravenna), where two doorways lead from the narthex into the church, one on either side of a corner of the octagon.

¹⁰Cf. J. W. Salomonson, "Late Roman Earthenware with Relief Decoration Found in Northern Africa and Egypt," *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden* 43 (1962): pl. xxxii.1–2; J. Garbsch, "Spätantike Sigillata-Tablets," *Spätantike Keramik aus Nordafrika in der Prähistorische Sammlung, Acta rei cretariae romane fautores*, suppl. vol. 5 (August 1980), 31, fig. 23. The Bir Ftouha roofiles are being studied by Susan Pringle.

¹¹P. Gauckler, *Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule et de l'Afrique*, vol. 2, *Afrique Proconsulaire (Tunisie)* (Paris, 1910),

A twelfth tomb, among the worst preserved in the enneagon, may have been the most privileged in terms of its location. The only known tomb in the western third of the building, it lies in the corner of the enneagon between the hypothetical doorways, oriented east-west on the main axis of the basilica. Although no differently constructed than the others, could this tomb have been the impetus for building the enneagon and subsequently attracted later burials? Might the nonagon have been built as a mausoleum for a single privileged individual, who was buried not in the center but at the structure's apex? The removal of ancient strata by tomb robbing makes a definitive answer impossible. The tomb's placement against the narthex of an ambulatory basilica seems to be an architectural reference (differences in scale and function notwithstanding) to the mausoleum of Helena attached to the martyr church of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus, a fourth-century ambulatory church on the outskirts of Rome.¹²

Most of the current excavation took place inside the monumental center of the complex and produced few of the disarticulated human remains and fragments of tomb inscriptions that ordinarily signal disturbed tombs. Trenches on the edge of the complex uncovered one tomb against the exterior of the north wall of the annex building and two against the exterior of the south wall of the basilica. Less privileged individuals may have been consigned to rest outside the monumental center of the complex. Except for the focal tombs in the apse and choir around which the basilica was built, burials seem never to have been permitted in the church proper.¹³ The tombs in the enneagon and annex building demonstrate that even privileged burials were restricted to the outer buildings of the complex and arrived relatively late in the history of the church.¹⁴ The careful control of burials makes

264–66, nos., 787–91, 793; and S. Stevens, "Excavations at Bir Ftouha in 1994 and 1996: Preliminary Report," *CEDAC Carthage Bulletin* 18 (1998): 9.

¹²J. Guyon, *Le cimetière aux deux lauriers*, BEFAR 264 (Rome, 1987), 207–35, 250–55.

¹³The focal tombs were those original to the construction phases of the basilica as currently understood: the three tombs in the apse of the basilica (first phase) and the one in the center of the nave (second phase).

¹⁴This pattern may even hold for the Christian buildings near the modern wellhouse. Delattre was astonished that although he found ten sarcophagi in a trefoil funerary

Bir Ftouha different from the other suburban basilicas at Carthage, funerary basilicas which often have a high concentration of tombs, especially inside the church. While the ambulatory attests that the original focus of the Bir Ftouha church was the group of special tombs in the apse and the choir, these did not attract other subsequent burials. Rather, later burials appear to have been excluded from the church proper. They were permitted in less important areas, inside the enneagon and annex building and outside the buildings of the complex.

With its *quadratum populi* of 17 by 27 meters, the Bir Ftouha basilica is modest in size by comparison with the other suburban basilicas at Carthage.¹⁵ In fact, it was substantially smaller than its annex building, measuring 20 by 40 meters (on the outside) (Fig. 3). Despite its size, however, the annex building enhanced rather than detracted from the church: it added a north-south axis and, at the same time, extended the basilica's original east-west axis with the baptistery. Although the hour-glass shape of its interior is unparalleled, the annex building is an elaborate *chevet*, a feature that regularly enclosed the apses of North African basilicas. The ambulatory design of the Bir Ftouha annex building is related, in spirit if not in plan, to the *chevet* of the basilica at Siagu.¹⁶ The purpose of the Bir Ftouha annex seems to have been to circulate visitors through various parts of the complex, provid-

ing limited access to the tombs in the apse. In this, Bir Ftouha resembles the pilgrimage churches of St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome, whose transepts performed this function.¹⁷

Since the excavation has just been completed, the stratigraphic report is in progress, and the thorough analysis of the finds has just begun, any conclusions about the site would be prematurely drawn. Nevertheless, the remarkably unified plan that has emerged during five campaigns of excavation deserves some preliminary comment. The basilica at the core of the Bir Ftouha complex is unusual for its ambulatory, but more remarkable for the extraordinary embellishments to the basilica plan. The enneagon is without parallel in early Christian architecture, and it must have been designed to meet the specific needs of this complex. It is also a clever variation on the octagon or circle. The balancing of the basilica's east-west axis, prolonged by the baptistery and the enneagon, with the transverse axis of the annex gave the Bir Ftouha complex the shape of a Latin cross overall. This cruciform plan, an unusual hybrid of longitudinal and centralized forms, is unique in Africa. The innovative and sophisticated design of the Bir Ftouha complex will provide a counterbalance to a long-held opinion that Christian architecture in North Africa was conservative.¹⁸ If current dating of the phases is sustained and places the development of Bir Ftouha late in the Vandal period, the complex will stand as another small corrective to the commonplace that Vandal Carthage was a city of stagnation and decline.

chapel, in all the dirt he moved in and around that structure no other tomb inscriptions and only a few other burials were found, Delattre, *CRAI* (1929): 29.

¹⁵Damous el Karita is 45 × 65 m (9 aisles, 11 bays), Basilica Maiorum is 45 × 61 m (9 aisles, 13 bays), St. Monique is 35.5 × 71.3 m (7 aisles, 14 bays), Bir el Knissia is 25.6 × 46.6 m (3 aisles, 11 bays).

¹⁶N. Duval, "Le chœur de l'église de Siagu (Tunisie)," *Felix Ravenna*, ser. 4, 127–30 (1984–85): 159–99.

¹⁷F. Tolotti, "Il S. Sepolcro di Gerusalemme e le coeve basiliche di Roma," *Römische Mitteilungen* 93 (1986): 498–512.

¹⁸R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New York, 1975), 199–206 passim.